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Research Article

Meritocracy or Bias? The Determinants of Leadership Selection in Professional Football[a]

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This paper investigates the determinants of team captain selection in professional football using a dataset of 1.9 million player-match observations from the 2018-2024 seasons across 34 countries. Employing logit models with team-season fixed effects, we find strong evidence of nationality-based discrimination: foreign players are 71.7% less likely to be selected as captain compared to native players with equivalent performance characteristics. This penalty is remarkably robust across specifications and particularly pronounced in elite leagues. The findings reveal persistent barriers to leadership roles for immigrant workers even in highly competitive, performance-driven environments where meritocratic principles presumably prevail.

JEL codes: J71, J24, M51, Z22

Keywords: Leadership selection; Labour market discrimination; Immigration; Team captains

1 Introduction

The selection of organisational leaders represents one of the most consequential decisions in labour markets, with implications for firm performance, organisational culture, and individual career trajectories. While economic theory suggests that competitive markets should select leaders based on merit and capability, a substantial body of evidence documents persistent deviations from meritocracy in promotion decisions (Becker, 1971; Arrow, 1973; Bertrand & Hallock, 2001). Identifying and quantifying such deviations, however, remains empirically challenging due to the difficulty of observing individual productivity and leadership potential in most workplace settings.

Professional sports offer a unique laboratory for studying leadership selection precisely because performance is measured and publicly observable (Kahn, 2000; Szymanski, 2003). Every action on the field is recorded, creating an environment where productivity differences cannot explain distinct outcomes. In this paper, we examine team captain selection in professional football, where the transparency of performance data allows us to test whether foreign players face barriers to leadership positions even when their productivity equals or exceeds that of domestic players.

Understanding discrimination in leadership selection matters for several reasons. First, team captains play crucial roles beyond symbolic means; they serve as on-field leaders,

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communicate with officials, represent the team publicly, and influence team culture and performance (Fransen et al., 2014; Cotterill & Fransen, 2016). Second, captaincy often reflects broader patterns of career advancement within organisations. If qualified foreign players are systematically excluded from leadership positions despite comparable or superior performance, this suggests deeper barriers to internal promotion that extend well beyond sports. Third, in an era of increasing globalisation and international labour mobility, understanding whether meritocracy prevails in leadership selection has important implications for organisational efficiency and equity.

Professional football provides an ideal setting for studying leadership selection, as team captains play crucial, visible roles that directly impact team performance. Unlike ceremonial leadership positions, football captains exercise real authority: they make tactical adjustments during matches, serve as the coach's on-field representative, and are the only players authorised to approach referees about decisions. They coordinate defensive formations, motivate teammates during difficult periods, and often determine penalty and free-kick takers in crucial moments. The multifaceted nature of the position, which requires both excellent performance and leadership qualities, makes captain selection a meaningful test of how organisations balance merit against other considerations (Koçsoy, 2024).

We analyse 1.9 million player-match observations covering 107,944 unique players across 1,679 teams. This approach allows us to compare foreign and domestic players competing for leadership within identical team environments, eliminating many confounding factors that plague cross-sectional studies of workplace discrimination (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Oreopoulos, 2011). As a result, we find that foreign players face significantly lower odds of being selected as captain, even after controlling for performance ratings, age, position, and tenure at their current club.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows: The related literature and theoretical background of the study will be presented in Section 2. Section 3 provides the details of the data used and the methodology employed. The results of the empirical analysis are reported in 4, followed by their discussion in Section 5. Finally, Section 6 concludes.

2 Literature Review and Theoretical Background

The economics of discrimination has evolved considerably since Becker's (1971) seminal distinction between taste-based and statistical discrimination. While competitive forces should, in theory, eliminate costly discrimination, empirical evidence consistently shows persistent disparities across various dimensions. Our study contributes to this literature by examining discrimination in internal promotion decisions in professional football. However, the results can be generalised to the selection of leadership roles within organisations with employees from different nationalities.

While much of the discrimination literature focuses on wage differentials, barriers to leadership positions may be even more consequential for workers' career trajectories and organisational integration. Leadership roles provide visibility, influence over organisational decisions, access to informal networks, and opportunities for further advancement (Cotter et al., 2001). Moreover, exclusion from leadership positions carries symbolic weight that extends beyond individual careers. When organisations systematically exclude members of particular groups from visible leadership roles, they signal limits to those groups' full membership and potential for contribution (Ely & Thomas, 2001). In the context of immigration

and workplace integration, leadership access represents a critical dimension of inclusion that wage equality alone cannot capture. Therefore, understanding discrimination in leadership selection addresses a fundamental question about the depth and completeness of labour market integration for foreign workers.

The challenges facing immigrant workers in labour markets have received substantial attention from economists. Borjas (1994, 1999) documented persistent wage gaps for immigrants that human capital differences cannot fully explain. More recent studies showed discrimination at the hiring stage, with identical résumés receiving different callback rates depending on the foreign-sounding names they carry (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Oreopoulos, 2011). However, these studies face the perpetual challenge of controlling for actual productivity differences or relying on artificial experimental settings. Our contribution is to examine discrimination in a natural setting where actual performance is both observable and contractible, following the approach of Szymanski (2000) and Kahn (2000).

The concept of "glass ceilings", invisible barriers preventing minority groups from advancing to leadership positions, has been particularly prominent in the gender discrimination literature (Albrecht et al., 2003; Arulampalam et al., 2007). Guryan & Charles (2013) and Blau & Kahn (2017) showed that while wage gaps have narrowed, leadership gaps have persisted. We extend this framework to examine whether similar glass ceiling effects exist for foreign workers, even in globalised industries where international mobility is common.

Empirical evidence suggests that glass ceiling effects may be more severe and persistent than wage discrimination. Baxter & Wright (2000) found that gender gaps in authority and decision-making power substantially exceeded corresponding wage gaps, even after controlling for human capital and occupational characteristics. Similarly, studies of racial minorities in corporate settings document that barriers to executive and board positions remain substantial even as wage gaps have narrowed (Zweigenhaft & Domhoff, 2011). The persistence of leadership selection barriers despite legal protections against discrimination suggests that these inequalities are particularly resistant to market forces and policy interventions. For immigrant workers specifically, research indicates that while wage penalties may attenuate with time in the host country, advancement to supervisory and managerial positions shows much less improvement with tenure (Akresh, 2008). This asymmetry between wage convergence and persistent leadership barriers motivates our focus on captaincy selection as a window into the mechanisms that limit career advancement for foreign workers.

Sports economics has proven particularly fruitful for testing labour market theories, as articulated in influential surveys by Kahn (2000), Szymanski (2003), and, more recently, Palacios-Huerta (2025). The advantages are compelling: performance is precisely measured, contracts and outcomes are public, and natural experiments arise through drafts, trades, and injuries. Within this literature, several studies have documented discrimination. Szymanski (2000) used wage data from English football to test for racial discrimination, finding evidence consistent with co-worker discrimination. Price & Wolfers (2010) documented racial bias in basketball refereeing, showing that officials call more fouls against players of the opposite race. Parsons et al. (2011) found similar bias in baseball umpiring, though this disappeared when monitoring technology was introduced.

The study of captaincy selection in professional football offers several methodological advantages beyond those typically available in sports economics research. First, the captain role combines both a formal designation (clearly observable) and meaningful responsibilities (communication with referees, team representation), unlike many corporate leadership posi-

tions, where authority may be ambiguous or shared. Second, the high frequency of captain assignments across thousands of matches provides statistical power unavailable in studies of executive or board appointments. Third, the global nature of professional football, with extensive player mobility across national boundaries, creates variation in "foreign" status that would be difficult to observe in single-country studies of other industries. Finally, the combination of transparent performance metrics and high-stakes competition makes football an ideal setting for detecting discrimination that persists despite strong meritocratic pressures.

Studies examining team diversity have yielded important insights for our analysis. Kahane et al. (2013) found that linguistic diversity reduced team performance in the NHL, while Ingersoll et al. (2019) documented benefits from diversity in terms of creative play and tactical innovation. These findings suggest that diversity presents both challenges and opportunities, with leadership potentially playing a crucial mediating role. Maderer et al. (2014), by examining leadership structures specifically, found that homogeneous leadership often emerges in diverse team sports.

Recent work in sports psychology has highlighted the importance of team captains for performance and cohesion. Fransen et al. (2014) identified four distinct leadership roles in sports teams: task, motivational, social, and external, with captains often fulfilling multiple roles simultaneously. Cotterill & Fransen (2016) documented that effective captaincy significantly impacts team performance, particularly in high-pressure situations. These findings underscore that captain selection has real consequences beyond symbolic representation.

The importance of captain selection extends beyond individual career outcomes to broader questions about immigrant integration and organisational diversity. Exclusion from leadership roles can signal to foreign players that, regardless of their performance and tenure, they will face limits to their acceptance and advancement. This "double glass ceiling"—where foreign workers face both initial wage penalties and subsequent barriers to leadership—may affect not only individual career decisions but also broader patterns of international labour mobility. Moreover, systematic exclusion from captaincy despite equivalent qualifications may reflect or reinforce workplace cultures that limit foreign workers' full participation in organisational life. If even in professional football, where performance is highly transparent and meritocratic principles are strongly emphasised, foreign players face persistent barriers to leadership selection, this suggests that similar, or even more substantial, barriers likely exist in less transparent, lower-stakes organisational contexts.

The theoretical framework for understanding discrimination in leadership selection draws from both economic and psychological perspectives. From an economic standpoint, coaches face a decision problem in which they must balance productivity considerations with other factors. Following Becker (1971) and Arrow (1973), we can conceptualise discrimination as arising from either taste-based preferences (coaches prefer domestic leaders) or statistical discrimination (coaches use nationality as a signal for unobserved leadership qualities). From a psychological perspective, social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) suggests that in-group favouritism may lead to a preference for domestic leaders even when foreign players possess equal or superior qualities. The similarity-attraction paradigm (Byrne, 1971) predicts that decision-makers select leaders who share their characteristics.

3 Data and Methodology

3.1 Data Description

The data has been collected from a widely used sports results website, SofaScore. In total, we have 1.92 million observations with players' complete data on performance ratings, age, position, and playing time. Our dataset covers the 2018-2024 seasons from 34 countries. Each observation captures whether a player served as captain in a specific match, allowing us to track leadership assignments dynamically rather than relying on season-level aggregates. The rating variable is measured by SofaScore using artificial intelligence models to evaluate a player's performance, as detailed below.

Our unit of analysis is the player-match observation. One might worry that this approach artificially inflates sample size by counting the same captain decision multiple times within a season (if a player is captain, they are captain in every match they play). However, our empirical strategy addresses this concern by using a fixed-effects model. By including team-season fixed effects, we effectively compare players within the same team and season, controlling for team-level captain decisions. This specification identifies the foreign player penalty as arising from variation in who is selected as captain within teams, not from repeated observations of the same underlying decision. Moreover, captaincy can and does change within seasons due to rotations, injuries, and mid-season transfers, providing genuine within-season variation in many cases.

A critical concern in studying captain selection is whether foreign players have shorter tenure at their clubs, which could mechanically explain lower captain rates if teams prefer established players as leaders. We address this by constructing a tenure measure for each player-club pairing using the cumulative number of matches played for the current club. Importantly, we find that foreign and domestic players have nearly identical tenure levels. Foreign players have an average of 60.3 matches at their current club compared to 60.8 for domestic players. This similarity in tenure is crucial as it means differences in captain selection cannot be attributed to foreign players being new to their teams. Nonetheless, we include tenure controls in our models to ensure robustness, as time spent at a club may independently affect captain selection through factors such as familiarity with the club's organisational culture, fans and teammates.

The summary statistics in Table 1 reveal several important patterns. The overall captain rate of 5.6% reflects the exclusive nature of the position: only one field player per team can serve as captain in each match. Foreign players comprise 34.3% of our sample, which reflects

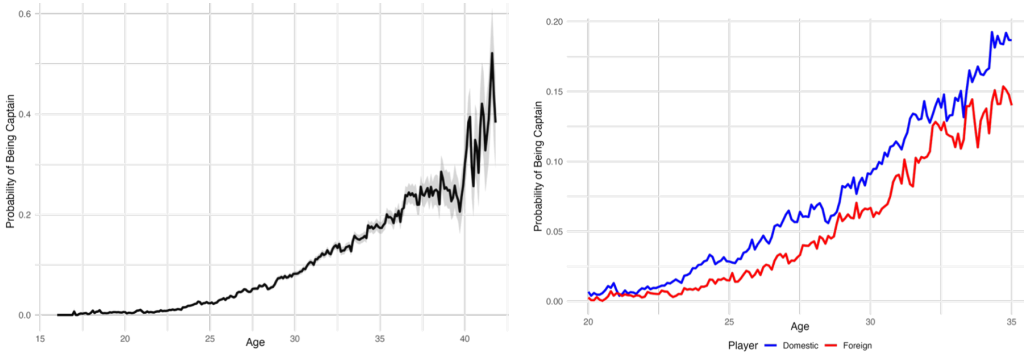
Table 1: Summary Statistics

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Age	26.578	4.610	15	45
Captain	0.056	0.229	0	1
Defender	0.321	0.467	0	1
Foreign	0.343	0.475	0	1
Forward	0.205	0.403	0	1
Goalkeeper	0.069	0.253	0	1
Midfielder	0.406	0.491	0	1
Minutes Played	67.856	28.934	1	90
Rating	6.860	0.535	3	10
Tenure (in matches)	37.141	38.691	1	444

Note: Number of observations is 1,919,179.

football's status as one of the world's most globalised labour markets. The richness of our performance measures deserves emphasis. Player ratings, ranging from 1 to 10, incorporate dozens of match actions, including pass completion rates, defensive interventions, aerial duels won, and creative play.

Age tells an important story about career dynamics. Figure 1a below shows the relation between the probability of being a captain and age. The probability of being captain increases steadily with age, accelerating in the late twenties. This pattern holds for both domestic and foreign players, but with foreign players shifted down at every age.



(a) by age **(b)** by age and foreign status

Figure 1: Probability of Being Captain

Additionally, at each age, domestic players have a higher chance of being team captain, as shown in Figure 1b. The parallel lines suggest that foreign players do not grow into leadership roles, and the gap persists throughout careers. Even foreign players in their prime captaincy years (30-33) have lower leadership probabilities than domestic players just entering professional football.

3.2 Empirical Strategy

Our identification strategy exploits within-team-season variation in captain selection. The main specification employs logit models of the form:

$$\begin{aligned} Pr(Captain_{ijst} = 1) = \wedge(&\beta_1 Performance_{ijst} + \beta_2 Experience_{ijst} \\ &+ \beta_3 Position_i + \beta_4 Foreign_i + \gamma_{jt}) \end{aligned} \tag{1}$$

where i indexes players, j teams, s seasons, t matches, and $\wedge$ is the logistic function. Performance includes player ratings and logged minutes played. Age captures career stage through age and age-squared terms to allow for non-linear effects. In addition to performance and demographic controls, we include log(matches at club) as a measure of player tenure at their current club. Position indicators distinguish defenders, midfielders, and forwards from the goalkeeper reference category. The coefficient of interest, β_4, measures the difference in captain probability between foreign and domestic players within the same team-season, while controlling for performance, age, position, and tenure.

This within-team approach addresses several key identification concerns. Teams with different propensities to appoint foreign captains might systematically differ in unobserved ways; perhaps some clubs have more internationally oriented philosophies or fan bases more accepting of foreign leadership. Team-season fixed effects absorb all such time-invariant team characteristics. Similarly, league-wide changes in regulations or cultural attitudes that might affect both foreign player recruitment and captain selection are absorbed by the season-specific team effects.

One potential concern is that foreign players might have systematically different communication skills, which could affect their leadership capabilities. While we cannot directly control for language proficiency, we examine heterogeneity across leagues with different linguistic environments. The remarkable stability of the foreign penalty across contexts suggests that language barriers alone cannot explain our results. Moreover, in elite European leagues where English often serves as a lingua franca and where foreign players frequently speak multiple languages, the penalty remains unchanged.

4 Results

4.1 Main Results

Table 2 presents our main results. Column (1) begins with performance measures alone, showing that higher-rated players and those receiving more playing time are significantly more likely to be captains. The logit coefficient of 0.089 on player rating indicates that a one-point increase in rating increases the odds of being captain by approximately 9%. The

Table 2: Determinants of Team Captain Selection (Logit Coefficients)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Player Rating	0.089***	0.074***	0.071***	0.084***	0.089***	0.082***
	(0.012)	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.012)	(0.013)	(0.013)
Log(Minutes Played)	2.560***	2.421***	2.400***	2.379***	2.407***	2.361***
	(0.041)	(0.037)	(0.037)	(0.034)	(0.034)	(0.033)
Age		0.278***	0.636***	0.583***	0.612***	0.597***
		(0.006)	(0.060)	(0.059)	(0.059)	(0.059)
Age^2			-0.006***	-0.005***	-0.005***	-0.005***
			(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Defender				0.550***	0.571***	0.619***
				(0.097)	(0.097)	(0.096)
Midfielder				0.593***	0.620***	0.669***
				(0.097)	(0.098)	(0.096)
Forward				-0.133	-0.054	0.021
				(0.109)	(0.109)	(0.108)
Foreign Player					-0.878***	-0.837***
					(0.062)	(0.062)
Tenure (Matches)						0.303***
						(0.010)
R^2	0.086	0.225	0.226	0.234	0.246	0.256

Notes: All models include team-season fixed effects with 1,637,811 observations. Team-level clustered standard errors are in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. The reference category for the position is goalkeeper.

effect of minutes played in logaritims is even larger, with a coefficient of 2.56, suggesting that playing time serves as a strong signal of coach confidence. This is added to control for extreme performances in short playing time, such as last-minute goal-scorers. It is not

surprising that captains play longer as they are starting eleven players. Therefore, this is a correlation, not causation.

Adding age variables in columns (2) and (3) reveals the importance of age in leadership selection. The positive coefficient on age (0.64) and negative coefficient on age-squared (-0.01) confirm an inverse U-shaped relationship, with the probability of being captain increasing through players' twenties and peaking in the early thirties. That confirms the visual findings of Figure 1. At the mean age of 26.6 years, the marginal effect of an additional year is substantial, reflecting the value placed on age and maturity in leadership roles.

Position effects, added in column (4), show clear hierarchies in leadership selection. The logit coefficients indicate that defenders (0.55) and midfielders (0.59) have substantially higher odds of being captain compared to goalkeepers, while forwards show no significant difference. This ordering aligns with tactical considerations about field position and team organisation, as defenders and midfielders are better positioned to observe and coordinate team play.

Column (5) introduces our key variable: foreign player status. The coefficient of -0.88 indicates that foreign players have dramatically lower odds of being captain. As mentioned above, time spent at the club, i.e., tenure, might be an important factor in selecting captains. Finally, column (6), which accounts for all these critical factors, the coefficient (-0.84) on our key variable of interest, Foreign Player, remains large, negative, and statistically significant. This indicates a substantial penalty for foreign players, even when they have the same performance, age, position, and tenure as their domestic counterparts. An odds ratio (exp(-0.84) = 0.43) interpretation of this effect is significant; foreign players have a 57% lower probability of being captain than comparable domestic players. As detailed in Table 4, this coefficient corresponds to an average marginal effect (AME) of -4.0 percentage points. Given the baseline captain probability of 5.6% in our sample, this penalty represents a 71.7% reduction in the likelihood of a foreign player being named captain.

4.2 Robustness Checks

Table 3 presents robustness checks examining the sensitivity of the foreign penalty to alternative specifications and sample restrictions. Using only team fixed effects rather than team-season effects yields a similar coefficient of -0.78. With only season fixed effects, the penalty attenuates to -0.39, likely because this specification fails to account for the correlation between team-specific foreign recruitment and captain selection policies. The fact that the penalty shrinks but remains highly significant even in this weak specification suggests persistent discrimination beyond team-specific factors.

Table 3: Robustness Checks (Logit Coefficients)

	Team FE	Season FE	Match FE	No GK	Top 5
Player Rating	0.062***	0.040	0.327***	0.088***	0.163***
Log(Minutes)	2.327***	2.288***		2.409***	2.256***
Age	0.615***	0.518***	0.572***	0.576***	0.480**
Age^2	-0.006***	-0.005***	-0.005***	-0.005***	-0.003
Foreign Player	-0.779***	-0.390***	-0.688***	-0.843***	-1.080***
Tenure (Matches)	0.284***	0.293***	1.037***	0.300***	0.302***
R^2	0.248	0.212	0.206	0.281	0.246
Observations	1,703,742	191,917	915,673	1,506,702	225,632

Notes: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05. Position controls included but not reported.

Match fixed effects represent the most demanding specification, exploiting only within-match variation across teams. Despite dramatically reduced identifying variation, the foreign penalty actually increases to -0.69, suggesting that when we compare foreign and domestic players in the exact same match, the discrimination becomes even more apparent, ruling out match-specific factors such as opponent quality or stakes.

Sample restrictions provide further evidence of robustness. Excluding goalkeepers, who might face unique selection criteria given their specialised role, yields a coefficient of -0.84, virtually identical to our main specification. This confirms that our results are not driven by position-specific selection patterns. When we focus on the top five European leagues (Premier League, La Liga, Serie A, Bundesliga, and Ligue 1) where foreign players are common and often the highest-paid team members, the penalty remains substantial at -1.08. The persistence of discrimination in these top, high-stakes leagues challenges any notion that globalisation eliminates bias in leadership selection.

Table 4 summarises the average marginal effects for key variables for a better interpretation. To contextualise, this penalty exceeds the positive effects of being a defender or midfielder rather than a forward. Foreign defenders face lower captain probabilities than domestic forwards, despite the strong position effects favouring defenders. The persistence of such a large penalty in competitive professional sports, where winning translates directly into millions in revenue, suggests deeply rooted bias resistant to market pressures.

Table 4: Average Marginal Effects

Variable	Logit Coefficient	Marginal Effect	Percent of Mean
Foreign Player	-0.837	-0.040	-71.7%
Defender	0.619	0.033	59.7%
Midfielder	0.669	0.036	65.4%
Forward	0.021	0.001	1.9%
Tenure	0.303	0.028	49.5%

5 Discussion and Implications

Our results document substantial and persistent discrimination against foreign players in team leadership selection. The magnitude of the effect, a 71.7% reduction in the probability of being captain, far exceeds typical immigrant wage gaps documented in the labour economics literature, which generally range from 10-30% (Borjas, 1999; Card, 2005). This suggests that discrimination may be particularly severe for visible leadership positions where symbolic representation matters alongside productivity.

It is important to emphasise that team captaincy represents more than a symbolic honour. Koçsoy (2024) demonstrates that formal captains potentially affect their teammates' performance, suggesting tangible spillover effects reflected in players' market valuations. Beyond these performance effects, captaincy carries practical advantages within the game itself. According to football regulations, only the team captain is permitted to approach and address the referee during matches. When other players engage with referees, particularly in an assertive manner, they risk receiving yellow or red cards, which can result in match suspensions. The captain's privilege of communicating with officials thus protects teammates from disciplinary sanctions and potential absences. These factors—positive spillover effects on team performance and protection from bookings—translate into real economic value that

could strengthen a player's position in transfer and contract negotiations. The systematic exclusion of foreign players from these advantages has meaningful career implications beyond symbolic recognition.

Several potential mechanisms could drive these results. Statistical discrimination would suggest that coaches use nationality as a signal for unobserved leadership characteristics such as communication skills or cultural fit with teammates. However, the stability of the penalty across leagues with different linguistic environments and the lack of attenuation with age argue against pure statistical discrimination. If coaches were learning about individual foreign players' leadership capabilities through repeated interaction, we would expect the penalty to diminish over time within teams.

Taste-based discrimination, where coaches, teammates, or other stakeholders have preferences for domestic leaders independent of productivity considerations, appears more consistent with our findings. The persistence of substantial discrimination in high-stakes professional sports, where winning translates directly into revenue and job security, suggests that these preferences are deeply ingrained. If discrimination persists despite such strong financial incentives for optimal decision-making, it likely runs even deeper in traditional employment settings where performance is less transparent and payoffs to leadership quality are less immediate.

An alternative explanation for the foreign penalty might relate to personality traits and leadership characteristics. Captains are often selected based on perceived leadership qualities, communication skills, and ability to inspire teammates. While such characteristics are undoubtedly important, we do not believe they systematically disadvantage foreign players. Leadership and character are personality traits that vary considerably among individuals, regardless of nationality. Without comprehensive personality assessments of professional players whose data are not available, we cannot directly test this hypothesis. However, we see no theoretical or empirical reason to expect that foreign players would systematically possess weaker leadership qualities than domestic players of equivalent performance levels. Indeed, foreign players who successfully compete at the highest levels of professional football have already demonstrated considerable resilience, adaptability, and competitive drive, which are qualities commonly associated with leadership. The persistence of the foreign penalty even after controlling for performance, age, and tenure suggests that nationality itself, rather than correlated personality traits, drives captain selection patterns.

For policymakers and organisational leaders, our results underscore that achieving workplace equality requires more than ensuring equal pay or removing formal barriers. Even when foreign workers achieve identical performance and accumulate substantial experience, they face persistent exclusion from leadership opportunities. This glass ceiling effect not only limits individual careers but may also deprive organisations of valuable leadership talent. The implications extend well beyond professional sports to corporate and organisational leadership more broadly. The patterns we document in football, where performance is transparent, meritocratic pressures are intense, and economic incentives for optimal decisions are strong, likely exist in more opaque form across industries where leadership quality is harder to measure and competitive pressures are weaker. Multinational corporations should examine whether similar barriers prevent foreign employees from advancing to executive positions, even after controlling for tenure and performance. Human resources departments might consider implementing structured leadership selection processes with explicit, performance-based criteria to reduce scope for unconscious bias. Organisations could also establish diver-

sity monitoring systems that track promotion rates by nationality, identifying departments or teams where foreign professionals face systematic disadvantages. For industries facing skill shortages and actively recruiting international talent, understanding and addressing these barriers becomes particularly urgent. If highly skilled foreign professionals recognise that career advancement beyond technical roles will be limited, recruitment efforts may prove less effective, and retention of top talent may suffer. Educational institutions training future managers should incorporate awareness of nationality-based discrimination into leadership development programs. Finally, policymakers might consider whether employment discrimination laws adequately protect foreign workers from barriers to advancement, or whether additional provisions targeting leadership selection would be warranted. Our findings suggest that integration policies should focus not merely on facilitating foreign workers' entry into labour markets but also on ensuring their equal access to career progression and leadership opportunities.

One might argue that preferring domestic captains reflects rational organisational decision-making rather than discrimination. For instance, native-speaking captains might communicate more effectively with local fans, media, and sponsors, or better understand cultural nuances important to team identity. While such considerations could provide some justification for preferring domestic leaders, several factors suggest they cannot fully explain the magnitude of the foreign penalty we observe. First, the effect size, a 71.7% reduction in captain probability, appears disproportionate to any communication advantages domestic players might possess. Second, the penalty persists and is actually strongest in elite international leagues where players routinely interact in English and team environments are highly cosmopolitan. Third, many foreign players spend years at their clubs, becoming fluent in the local language and deeply integrated into the community, yet continue to face substantial penalties. Finally, even if communication advantages exist, using nationality as a blanket proxy for communication ability constitutes statistical discrimination, particularly when individual-level measures of language proficiency, cultural integration, and leadership effectiveness are observable to coaches and management. The persistence of such severe penalties despite observable information about individual capabilities suggests that discrimination, rather than purely rational preferences, plays a substantial role.

The welfare costs of biased leadership selection extend beyond individual careers. Teams that systematically overlook foreign candidates for captaincy may end up appointing suboptimal leaders, sacrificing performance for familiarity. Recent works by Gould & Winter (2009) and Jewell et al. (2014) showed that diverse teams can outperform homogeneous ones when properly managed, suggesting that diverse leadership might enhance rather than hinder performance. Our findings indicate that teams fail to capitalise on this potential, maintaining homogeneous leadership even as their playing rosters become increasingly international.

An important limitation of our analysis is that we examine the broad category of "foreign" players without distinguishing between different nationalities, ethnic backgrounds, or racial groups. Given that prior research has documented racial discrimination in football (Szymanski, 2000) and other labour markets (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004), understanding whether captain selection patterns vary by player origin represents a crucial direction for future work. Players from certain countries or regions might face more severe penalties than others, and discrimination might vary depending on cultural, linguistic, or racial proximity between the player's origin and the host country. For instance, European players competing

in other European leagues might face different barriers than players from South America, Africa, or Asia. Similarly, the experiences of Black and white foreign players might differ substantially. Unfortunately, our current data structure and sample size limitations prevent us from conducting sufficiently powered analyses of these important heterogeneity patterns. We strongly encourage future research to examine these questions using richer data on player characteristics and origins. Such analysis would not only provide a more complete picture of discrimination in leadership selection but also inform more targeted interventions to address these barriers.

The implications extend to contemporary debates about skilled immigration and global talent mobility. Many developed countries actively recruit foreign professionals to address skill shortages, yet our results suggest these workers may face permanent barriers to career advancement regardless of their contributions. Such discrimination not only violates principles of fairness but may also discourage talented individuals from pursuing international careers, ultimately reducing the benefits of global labour mobility. This connects to broader concerns raised by Kerr et al. (2016) about the integration of skilled immigrants in host country labour markets.

Our findings also speak to the literature on corporate governance and board diversity. The studies of Adams & Ferreira (2009) and Post & Byron (2015) have examined gender diversity in corporate leadership, finding mixed effects on performance but clear evidence of barriers to advancement. Our results suggest similar barriers exist for foreign professionals, potentially explaining the persistent homogeneity of corporate leadership despite increasingly diverse workforces. The fact that discrimination persists in transparent, performance-oriented environments like professional sports suggests it may be even more severe in corporate settings where "cultural fit" receives explicit consideration.

6 Conclusion

Using detailed performance data from professional football, we document substantial and persistent discrimination against foreign players in team leadership selection. Foreign players face a 71.7% reduction in captain probability relative to observationally equivalent domestic players, a penalty that remains stable across different competitive contexts, performance levels, and career stages. The magnitude and persistence of this discrimination in an environment with transparent performance metrics and strong competitive pressures suggest that leadership barriers in traditional employment settings may be even more severe.

Our findings contribute to multiple streams of economic research while raising important policy questions. For the discrimination literature, we provide clean evidence of bias in internal promotion decisions where performance differences cannot explain disparate outcomes. The advantage of our setting, observable productivity in a high-stakes environment, strengthens causal interpretation and suggests that discrimination in leadership selection may be more pervasive than previously recognised. For the sports economics literature, we extend the analysis beyond wages and hiring to internal career progression, showing that even successful integration into teams does not guarantee equal opportunity for advancement.

The results also speak to fundamental questions about meritocracy in modern labour markets. Despite decades of globalisation and increasing workplace diversity, our findings suggest that leadership opportunities remain significantly constrained by nationality. The

persistence of discrimination in professional sports, where diversity is common, performance is transparent, and optimal decision-making has clear financial rewards, indicates that market forces alone may be insufficient to eliminate bias in leadership selection. This has important implications for diversity initiatives, suggesting that active intervention may be necessary to achieve equal representation in leadership positions.

Future research should explore the performance consequences of discriminatory leadership selection and potential interventions to promote more meritocratic practices. Do teams with foreign captains perform differently? What institutional changes might reduce barriers to leadership for foreign professionals? As workforces become increasingly international and organisations operate across cultural boundaries, understanding and addressing discrimination in leadership selection becomes crucial for both equity and economic efficiency.

Our results suggest this challenge is more substantial than previously recognised. The glass ceiling for foreign workers appears particularly impermeable in leadership roles, where cultural capital and in-group preferences may matter more than individual productivity. Breaking through these barriers will require sustained attention from researchers, practitioners, and policymakers committed to achieving true meritocracy in organisational leadership.

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